

## Rethinking Jewish Modernity<sup>1</sup>

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Most scholars of Judaism in the modern period, including me, are likely to begin a survey such as this one by noting the awesome double shock which convulsed the Jews of Europe at the start of our era, a shock which generated unprecedented problems and unparalleled opportunities which continue to shape the lives Jews lead and the options they weigh today. The first shock was of course Emancipation: the opening of doors long closed to Jews; the appearance of new life-chances of a thousand varieties, all of which could be seized by Jews as individuals at the price of the integral communities that had anchored and constrained them for nearly two millennia. The second shock, no less familiar, was Enlightenment: a new language on the lips, a new set of furniture for the mind, and—no less important—a breakdown of easy distinctions between the Gentile world outside and the Jewish world within. Social, political and economic acceptance all came unevenly, and sometimes never came at all. Enlightenment by contrast entered the Jewish heart and soul with an energy and thoroughness that threw all they found there into turmoil. In sum, the Jewish world, the world of Judaism, was under siege. The various political and religious developments arising since 1789 can usefully be seen as defensive maneuvers designed to parry and get round besieging forces which could not and cannot be overcome.

My purpose here today is not so much to challenge that model, which I believe to be substantially correct, as to refine it, by calling into question the term in the equation which somehow seems to remain constant in much scholarship and theology concerned with the utterly transformed variables of Jewish identity and Judaism. That term, of course, is modernity, a concept which has become the object of intense scrutiny over the past two decades. It would be no exaggeration to say that modernity is now under siege, while Judaism and the Jewish people are doing quite well, thank you very much, the focus of scholarship having shifted from their

actual or imminent disappearance to the complex modalities of adjustment that have sustained them.

Even if one does not go as far as to say, with Jean-Francois Lyotard, that "the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age," leading to an analysis of what Lyotard named "the postmodern condition";<sup>2</sup> even if one sides instead with Jurgen Habermas, holding modernity to be an "unfinished project" in the midst of which we all still think and work, meaning that what Habermas calls "the philosophical discourse of modernity" still deserves to hold our attention and shape our thought<sup>3</sup>—even so one notes that Habermas must labor long and hard to demonstrate the continuing relevance of this discourse, which only a few years back was utterly taken for granted. He can do so only by disavowing many of the easy truths that are still legion in studies of modernity and particularly in studies of Jewish modernity—the obvious primacy of national identity, for example; the inevitability of secularization; the pervasiveness of a rational, scientific worldview; the irresistible claim of truths universally held to be self-evident. Nietzsche and his latter-day disciples—Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard—have had their corrosive effect on all purported evidence, the self-evident most of all. Habermas, in order to retrieve value in the "philosophical discourse of modernity," must attack the "furious labor of deconstruction," insisting that labor has exposed not "an excess" but only "a deficit of rationality."<sup>4</sup> We do not need to decide today if he is correct (though more often than not I believe he is). Our purpose is rather to consider what effect this debate, which has supplanted uncritical conceptions of modernity at center stage of recent scholarly discussion, should have on the way we think about the modernity of Judaism and the Jews.

I aim at nothing definitive. Time is short, and the thoughts to be articulated—my own, and those of others—are of recent vintage. I invite you to join me in a play of ideas intended to

point out recent paths, and chart a few not yet in existence, which we students of Jewish modernity should perhaps be walking.

## I. "Modern" Modernity

Let me begin with two little volumes issued recently by eminent historians whose work I much admire: David Vital's *The Future of the Jews: A People at the Crossroads* and Michael Meyer's *Jewish Identity in the Modern World*. Both volumes attempt to broadly sketch the outlines of the story that their authors have been telling in detail in the course of distinguished careers. They are thus all the more valuable for our purposes, limitations of space having resulted in attention only to the self-evident, the putatively uncontroversial. Meyer's work, for example, has three chapters, the topics of which could be guessed by anyone familiar with the modern Jewish story as we have become accustomed to hearing it recounted: Enlightenment, Antisemitism and Zion. To fill in the treatments given these three themes one has only to recite the subtitles: for Enlightenment, "the powerful enticements of reason and universalism," for anti-semitism, "the ambiguous effects of exclusion and persecution" and for Zion, "the centripetal force of Jewish peoplehood." These, Meyer tells us, "span the entire field of -Jewish modernity"<sup>5</sup>—and so they do, unless we question the basic conception of modernity which they presume.

Note first of all that Enlightenment is characterized by rationalism and universalism, and has a distinctly positive valence from the point of view of Jews and Judaism. It "beneficently drew Jews to identify with a larger world beyond the boundaries of Judaism." Meyer depicts its spread as gradual but unstoppable. As it moved in space from Western Europe to the East, so it moved in time from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, provoking resistance through renewed Jewish exclusivism on one extreme, assimilation and disappearance on the other, and a variety of options for identity in between. Meyer briefly notes the compartmentalization of reason and faith pioneered by Samson Raphael Hirsch, the

harmonization of revelation and historical criticism by Zechariah Frankel in a way that apparently left "Frankel's apparently tranquil soul" untroubled by cognitive dissonance, and—the case Meyer obviously regards most sympathetically—Abraham Geiger's religious reform, which came at the price of \_ 'severe identity crisis', "critical distance" and "long and painful struggle" leading to eventual integration: "a form of Judaism in which faith did not set bounds to science."<sup>6</sup> Rationalism and universalism are unquestionable realities in this analysis, and unequivocal goods. Criticism, reform, and most of all struggle, are prerequisites to authenticity, the norm underlying Meyer's evaluation. Science cannot and should not be limited by claims of faith. The model presumes clarity on what Judaism was before modernity, on what modernity was and on what has taken shape under its impact. I will have much to say about these three assumptions in a few moments.

The "negative" enters this picture only from the outside, if we discount the assimilation which inevitably followed the opening of social and cognitive doors long locked to Jews. Only anti-semitism put the brakes on the centrifugal processes set in motion by Enlightenment. Hatred and opposition by Gentiles led some Jews to self-hatred, feeding on a contempt for their Jewishness engendered by the Enlightenment critique of irrational tradition and chauvinistic particularism. Other Jews were led—often against their will, and in extremis—to renewed identification with their people and sympathy for its tradition.<sup>7</sup> This part of the story can be told briefly. We know how it ends.

Thesis and antithesis are now in place. The synthesis of course is "Zion: the centripetal force of Jewish peoplehood." Note the link between title and sub-title. The consciousness of Jewish peoplehood is identified with the Jewish national movement and the state it created. The "sense of Jewish peoplehood... represents the strongest component of Jewish identity today." Even faith is construed, as Mordecai Kaplan and Israeli secularists would have it, as a species of nationalism, remarkably so in a book by the pre-eminent historian of Reform Judaism. "Most

religious Jews link Judaism closely to Jewishness," Meyer tells us. "Their synagogue activities are ways of expressing ethnicity. Attending religious services is something Jews do as members of the Jewish people.<sup>8</sup> How else could they do it, as good moderns, fully two hundred years after Emancipation and Enlightenment?

Vital's book paints a picture at once very different and very similar. For the pre-eminent historian of modern Zionism, modernity requires no triptych but can be depicted on a single canvas. Chapter One, titled "The Plunge into Modernity," does not even bother to recount the beneficent effects emphasized by Meyer before plunging us into the manifest anti-Semitism of the Enlightenment and the price exacted for Emancipation in Jewish deracination and disappearance. On page nine we hear a French revolutionary attack the Jews of Strasbourg in language chillingly reminiscent of Haman's words to Ahasuerus. They circumcise their male infants "as if nature herself were imperfect." They wear long beards. They employ an ancient language of which they are generally ignorant. "I call upon the provisional commission that it forbid them such practices and arrange for an auto da fe to Truth of all Hebrew books .... "After this reminder that Amalek lives, Vital has no need of a chapter titled "Enlightenment", nor of a separate chapter titled "Anti-semitism." Instead we have three chapters, the heart of the book, devoted to the heart of Jewish modernity in Vital's view—"The Transformation of Jewry and the Confusion of the National Interest:" "Politics, Divergence, and Historical Discontinuity:" and "The Matter of Loyalties." Modern Jews in search of authentic identity did not choose between Enlightenment on the one hand and religious reform on the other, or should not have so chosen. The question was their continued existence as members of the Jewish people. The agenda was clear to those with eyes to see, the rational way to pursue it, the quest for Jewish statehood.<sup>9</sup>

Once that quest had been successfully concluded, we learn in Vital's penultimate chapter, we are left with "The Bifurcation of Jewry." This split "arises quite naturally and inevitably as a consequence of the great, central political fact of contemporary Jewish life ... that there are now,

as there had not been for twenty centuries, two classes of communities or collectivities in the Jewish world"—Israel and the diaspora. They are distinguished by Vital on one simple criterion. "There are two worlds, one of power, the other of powerlessness—or, at best, of a sort of pseudo-power, of a measure of influence on those individuals who do actually possess power." Vital is no less stark when stating the operative consequence of this division for world Jewry. "There can be no sharing between the two worlds' respective spokesmen and representatives"—not least, one gathers, in the writing of Jewish history, which Vital urges us to do anew in light of the transformation accomplished in Jewish nation-building.<sup>10</sup> Jewish modernity, for him, centers on that effort. All the rest is commentary. In a short book, Vital can well afford to omit it.

The divergence between a summary of modern Jewish history penned by a scholar at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and one by a scholar at Tel Aviv University is obvious, even if slightly blurred by Cincinnati's recognition—in keeping with contemporary Reform Judaism, and to my mind correct—that Jewish peoplehood in our day centers on activities in or concerning Zion. Note however that the two historians otherwise work with the same set of assumptions about modernity. Vital, for all his criticism of the French revolutionaries, agrees with them (and most scholarship of modernity) that "the idea of the Nation" had become primary. "It followed that there could be no room any more for distinct and separate peoples with distinct and separate rules of behavior,"<sup>11</sup> unless of course they inhabited separate nation-states. Moreover, for all that he abhors the Frenchman who attacked the Jews of Strasbourg in the name of the Nation, Vital too assumes that religious accommodation to the new nation-states of Europe would be just that: accommodation, a political maneuver to solve a political, social and economic problem. His sympathies are with the Jews, of course, and so with religion's role in helping Jews resist or refuse modernity's offer of admission on its terms. However, despite an immanent critique of Enlightenment because of the glaring disparity between its principles and the treatment its partisans accorded Jews, Vital's vision of Jewish modernity remains largely free of the doubt introduced by the likes of Lyotard and incorporated by the likes of Habermas. Vital

is hardly alone in this, though I should add at once that many Jewish historians have already surrendered the easy confidence about their subject that characterizes his work. I am not speaking here as a voice crying in the wilderness for reform but as an advocate of reform well under way. Let us look for a few moments, then, at the theorists who have helped to set its direction.

## II. "Post-modern" Modernity

In one sense, the impetus to this rethinking required no revisionism. It was provided with the rounding theorists of modernity, all of whom were profoundly ambivalent about the developments which they not only mapped but knowingly helped to further. Marx, least conflicted about the gains accrued through modernity, because least hesitant about the inevitability of the process, was of course quite critical of Enlightenment pretensions to either rationality or universality. He was on the one hand the proud heir of Locke, Voltaire and Rousseau, honoring his ancestors by superseding them. On the other hand he held up Kant and Hegel to the scrutiny of dialectical materialism and pronounced them not objective truth but "German Ideology." Thought was not without its location, its interests. Freud, no less convinced of the inevitability of reasons sway and the consequent secularization of all spheres of life, also feared the debilitating effect these

would have on morality and social cohesion. Reason was ever fragile, desire ever powerful. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud created objections which overwhelm his thesis about religion; in *Civilization and its Discontents* he wrote darkly about the struggle of Eros against Thanatos, life against death, fearing that growing awareness of our repressions will undermine our ability to hold the forces of destruction at bay.

Durkheim, far less skeptical of scientific objectivity than Marx even when he compared science to the religious worldviews which it in his view replaced, and far less pessimistic than Freud until the First World War robbed him of his faith in the saving power of science, was

nonetheless alarmed from the outset of his career at the effect modernity was having upon Western society and culture. It was, in a word, killing them. Europeans were committing suicide at an alarming rate, he found, primarily because of "egoism" and "anomie"—loss of the cognitive supports and the restraints of passion provided hitherto by integral religious communities.<sup>12</sup> "We are going through a stage of transition and moral mediocrity," he concluded in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. "The old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born."<sup>13</sup> The only hope lay in a rational religion, centered cognitively on science but built around sancta related to the nation and to occupational groups.

Weber had not even that frail hope to console him. In "Science as a Vocation" he poured scorn on "big children" who still looked to science as a source of faith, or joy, or the meaning of life. At best science could provide clarity about the painful choices before us.<sup>14</sup> Rationality, moreover—Weber's master-concept, signifying calculation, logic, systematization, universality—was all pervasive. Fully appreciative of its achievements, not the least of which was his own science, Weber nonetheless recognized that the "formal rationality" of calculation and efficiency concealed a dearth of "substantive rationality," work for the good, that to Weber was fateful and depressing.<sup>15</sup> Recall his characterization of modern society as an "iron cage." The passage is familiar, but a pleasure to repeat. "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."<sup>16</sup> One could hardly be more critical of modernity, more skeptical of its twin engines—Emancipation and Enlightenment—than Weber. No wonder then that his presence looms over almost all contemporary attempts to rethink modernity and its meaning.

It is something of a mystery to me how, despite the passionate ambivalence at the heart of all the rounding theorists, their successors at mid-century could have fashioned a notion of modernity as a single unstoppable process, composed always and everywhere of the same elements which allegedly predominated in Europe, and rounded on rationality; how that notion



could have been paired with a concept of secularization still less well-defined or empirically warranted. Shmuel Eisenstadt, among other eminent sociologists, has documented the prevalence of that simplistic notion not so very long ago and marked his own distance from it.<sup>17</sup> Habermas is constrained to do the same, lest his defense of rationality, as the key element of modernity collapse under its own weight. Any adequate notion of modernity, he writes, must be dissociated from its modern European origins, made over into a "spatio-temporally neutral model for processes of social development in general" and shorn of any necessary connection with rationalism, "so that processes of modernization can no longer be conceived of as rationalization, as the historical objectification of rational structures."<sup>18</sup> I take it that this complication of the modern is now widely accepted, even if I, like Habermas, am unwilling to give up on the objective of universal rationality and still believe that such rationality, suitably qualified, underlies and makes possible any attempt such as this one to make sense of the history in which we find ourselves.

It would seem, likewise, that any useful notion of secularization, the "decline of tradition," the "loss of faith? etc., etc., has to begin with all the hesitations, qualifications and caveats that accompany Peter Berger's theory, set forth cogently in *The Sacred Canopy* (1969) and *The Heretical Imperative* (1979).<sup>19</sup> Berger does not see modernity as a uniform or unilinear process that overtakes and eventually overwhelms static religious traditions. His starting point is rather human beings in need of systems of meaning. In one way or another we must and will make sense of life. Religion is not some cowboy challenged to a Dodge City duel and then gunned down or run out of town. It is rather one way of organizing reality, a way which—like any other, including science—cannot proceed via abstract ideas alone but must find support for the lens it holds up to reality through societal "plausibility structures" that make its way of seeing things seem compelling and even obvious.

Secularization, then, does not mean the end of religion—sudden or gradual, uneven or assured—but rather the decline in the power of religious ideas and institutions to control or affect whole spheres of modern life, whether personal, political, or economic.<sup>20</sup> Once the integral communities inside which human beings had made sense of their lives have given way to impersonal urban centers in which individuals jostle everyday against others with other commitments, all are driven to choose directions, to choose a way of seeing, knowing that they choose. Given the plethora of options, one option—traditional faith, perceived as necessary and exclusive—is precluded.<sup>21</sup>

Berger's model opens up numerous paths worthy of our consideration, not least because he joins the rounding theorists of modernity in linking the issue of faith to meaning on the one hand and desire on the other. Reason and the passions are both engaged, and never in isolation from one another. Recall that desire was no less important to Weber and Durkheim than to Freud; that Durkheim defined anomie precisely as the loss of the restraint that had once directed and con-strained the passions, while Weber built his whole Protestant Ethic thesis around John Wesley's famous dictum that the attempt to do good had resulted in the faithful doing well—satisfying the hunger for material goods—and doing well had meant the end of doing good. Puritanism's resolute asceticism regarding worldly consumption had driven early capitalism, but in the absence of Puritan faith and Puritan communities capitalism's insatiable need for ever greater consumption had made worldly asceticism seem pointless. "Material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history."<sup>22</sup> It seems folly to me, in the light of Weber, let alone of Marx, to discuss modernity as if Enlightenment could be divorced from capitalism, the search for meaning from the search for satisfaction, ego from id, religion from Weber's triad of "class, status and power," one sort of good from another. Berger to his credit insists that we put the choice for religious meaning in the context of the thousands of consumer choices we enact each day, that we consider the incredulity with which a modern self "in pursuit of happiness"—self-realization, self-fulfillment,

personal authenticity—will greet a religious tradition that claims exclusive possession of the truth and in its name commands the adherent to regulate minute aspects of daily life (the pursuit of sexual pleasure first among them) in its name.

A second advantage of Berger's model is that it enables us to account for the theological "move" which has dominated Protestant theology since Friedrich Schleiermacher and has played a leading role in Jewish theology since Buber and Rosenzweig: the appeal to personal experience. The model of modernity I am holding up to question here would simply say: what other room for faith remains after Kant? Reason has excluded God except as the ultimate ground for moral action; secularization has shunted religion to the sidelines of public activity. Where else can it reside except in some personal, non-rational, and usually affective realm? No surprise that we so often find it there. The amended model of modernity that I prefer would say rather: given the loss of integral communities and their precious plausibility structures, religious traditions have no hold on believers except the power of persuasion which in a society of individual consumers comes down to power to provide goods that people cannot secure elsewhere—chiefly community and meaning. Faith cannot in the first instance appeal to authorities such as God's commanding voice at Sinai. Nor can it appeal to the authority of taken-for-granted reality, for what it proposed, except in places like B'nai Brak or Borough Park, is pronouncedly counter-factual. Religious traditions must rather begin with the deeply-felt experiences of individuals and persuade them to interpret that experience in a way confirming of the counter-reality represented by their traditions.

Hence there is Abraham Heschel's strategy to begin with wide-spread experiences of awe, wonder, etc., and go from there to God, and only at the end to mitzvot, a particular "pattern for living" in accord with the norms of a particular tradition.<sup>23</sup> Hence, too, Buber's insistence that I-Thou experiences with other human beings, ever less frequent in the modern age but by no means rare, are the prerequisite to encounter with the Eternal Thou,<sup>24</sup> and Rosenzweig's appeal to

the common sense everyday experience of God, humanity and world, each irreducible to the others, each undefinable but no less real for all that,<sup>25</sup> hence, finally, Joseph Soloveitchik's division of our selves into Adam I and Adam II, the first a scientific ordering of reality that has all the marks of rationality—calculation, control, logic, purposes—while the second, not less but more than the first, has us reaching out for love, community, covenant, God.<sup>26</sup> Berger helps us understand why this "inductive" approach, working up from experience, has pretty much supplanted the "deductive" in theology (working down from objectively given truths of belief)—and why it has not been without either its problems or its successes.<sup>27</sup>

He also helps us to ask the right question of the contemporary Jewish predicament, which I take it is not primarily political or intellectual but rather existential and communal: whether Jews of varying commitments, in Israel and diaspora, can create plausibility structures of sufficient flexibility and strength to develop and hold their various allegiances to Jewish traditions. This formulation of the question both jibes with my personal Jewish commitments and conforms to the facts of Jewish modernity as I read them, with Berger's help. If we accept this reading, Emancipation and not Enlightenment, let alone anti-Semitism or Zionism, becomes the most important category of our analysis. For Meyer, we recall, Emancipation was subsumed under Enlightenment, for Vital it was omitted altogether on grounds that for Jews it was a sham. In my view—which incidentally accords with that of the dean of historians of modern Jewry, Jacob Katz—Emancipation was the crucial development, assuming we discard the connotation of untrammelled liberation from oppressive, stagnant "tradition" that the label was once meant to convey.<sup>28</sup> The move by Western Jews in the nineteenth century, and Jews elsewhere in the twentieth, "out of the ghetto," from towns to urban centers, from one set of occupations to another, from arranged marriages to unions born of love and romance, from one set of technologies and their accompanying presumptions about the way the world works to others in dynamic flux—all these elements of modernization are well-documented- What has yet to be documented sufficiently is the vast array of differing reactions Jews had to these developments.

We do not know what mitzvot most Jews continued to perform, let alone with what intentions; what they made of the prayers they uttered or refused to utter; what conceptions of God or Sinai, redemption or the afterlife, they held before and after by one, in differing degrees and in various ways, acted out the search for ideal and material goods, meaning and fulfillment, in the transformed conditions just described. This search always involved accommodation of diverse Jewish loyalties to others no less diverse. We have barely begun, I think, to understand how that accommodation worked.

Indeed, there is much darkness even where we thought there was most light. Yosef Yerushalmi's recent study of Freud's Moses and Monotheism has emphasized yet again how much we still have to learn about even the most well-documented of Jewish souls. To say that Freud emerges far more "Jewish" in the book is the least of it, however important. What matters more are the intricate subtleties of Freud's accommodations, discards, retrievals and repressions. Yerushalmi reminds us in the process that "the blandly generic term secular Jew gives no indication of the richly nuanced variety within the species."<sup>29</sup> One could of course say the same for Reform (Holdheim is not Geiger or Mannheimer, not to mention the thousands of Jews whose views we do not know) or for Orthodoxy (witness David Ellenson's fine study of Hildesheimer, near to Hirsch on the ideological spectrum yet far different in many crucial respects).<sup>30</sup> Gone is the easy equation of modernity with universality; Yerushalmi reads Freud's Moses as "an opportunity to finally lay to rest the false and insidious dichotomy between the 'parochial' and the 'universal,' that canard of the Enlightenment which became and remains a major neurosis of modern Jewish intellectuals."<sup>31</sup> In Freud's case one need hardly add that gone, too, is the easy equation of modernity with rationalism, which Freud's contemporary Weber had already noted is "a concept which covers a whole world of different things" and often conceals, as Freud too stressed, an "irrational element" at its origin and core.<sup>32</sup> From Weber and Freud we can move quickly, along with the disputants of post-modernity whom they profoundly influenced, to "deconstruct" not only rationality and universality but the notions of nationalism,

science, or self, in favor of murkier, messier, stickier subjects much harder to define. In sum: things are less in focus than we had imagined a few years ago. The images are harder to resolve.

### III. Re-imagining Modernity

I suppose it is my age—I am now in my forties, in the nineties—that makes me far more comfortable in such messes that need ordering than in orders already neat. Then, too, it is a function of what I read, whether in the realm of theory or that of history. Take Habermas, for example, who is concerned to salvage the philosophical discourse of modernity precisely in order to save and legitimate the possibility of authentic "life-worlds"—communities of life and thought—that are "autonomous": "neither bred nor kept by a political system for purposes of creating legitimation."<sup>33</sup> Driven by this commitment, precisely the one which animates committed Jews of whatever persuasion, in Israel or diaspora, Habermas reads the canon of modern thought (a charmingly old-fashioned notion, to which a Jew like me cannot but react with both sympathy and suspicion) as devoted to or at least supportive of that end. Subjectivity is no answer, he counsels. It will lead only to the death of real community, and so to state systems left to work on us without restraint. Nor does it allow for effective criticism of what exists. "Foucault veered off into a theory of power that has shown itself to be a dead end," however much his criticism of reason has been salutary—a dead end because it stands on no firm ground, and so can construct nothing<sup>34</sup> I am not wholly persuaded by this critique, let alone by Habermas' hopes for "communicative reason," but I am excited by his focus upon a "lifeworld" which "reproduces itself to the extent that these three functions, which transcend the perspectives of the actors, are fulfilled: the propagation of cultural traditions, the integration of groups by norms and values, and the socialization of succeeding generations."<sup>35</sup> This, precisely this, is of most urgency to me. Am I naive in believing that concern is not limited to me, indeed not limited to my generation, but has been present from the beginning of Jewish modernity, animating Mendelssohn's Jerusalem, the rabbinical conferences of the 1840's, the organization of *gemeinde* and *consistoire* and *kehillah*?

Or, coming at things from the opposite perspective, Lyotard's, consider the importance for Jewish modernity of the emphasis upon multiple "language games" and their perennial search for "legitimation." Lyotard seems to me correct in discerning two "meta-narratives" at work underneath modern philosophy and scholarship, giving them purpose, making them seem right and just and true. The first he calls "emancipation," knowledge as serving the public good, furthering freedom, dispensing justice. The second he calls "spirit," in which enlightenment is viewed as the latest in a long evolutionary progress of realizing the truth.<sup>36</sup> Spurred on by Nietzsche, armed with Thomas Kuhn, Lyotard is skeptical of both these "meta-narratives." He announces that we now live in a new age in which knowledge is recognized to be tied to power and in which no one way of organizing knowledge can claim a monopoly on relevant information, let alone control the existence of other language games.

For Jews and Judaism this gospel is both good and bad, I would suggest. It is good, because a small group of people, ever a minority culture, need not prove itself before the bar of another culture with pretensions to rationality and universality, let alone truth. Why not be a Jew, or a Buddhist, or a Christian, so long as one does not try to exercise what Lyotard calls "terror" upon competing language games? This can save a lot of energy and embarrassment. The price, of course, is the loss of integral community and integral selves. Lyotard asks, with good reason, whether the "general question of legitimation" is even "applicable to the vast clouds of language material constituting a society?" (Note the definition of society there.) "What is new in all this,?" he writes elsewhere in the essay, "is that the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction. And it does not look as though they will be replaced, at least not on their former scale .... Each individual is referred to himself. And each of us knows that our self does not amount to much."<sup>37</sup> This is the fatal flaw, it seems to me, even if Lyotard adds almost at once that "a self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now

more complex and mobile than ever before"<sup>38</sup>—returning us to the concern with community that drives Berger, Habermas and much of modern Jewish history. Judaism cannot coexist peacefully with a world or worldview according to which "our self does not amount to much." Nor, it seems, would Lyotard be receptive to a language game that claimed the highest legitimation of all—truth, rightness, God. At best, he could affirm Jewishness as no better or worse than any other language game, the State of Israel as no better or worse a framework in which to play it.

I want to leave theory for history now, briefly noting four recent studies which in various ways lend further support to the model of Jewish modernity I am advocating and call previous models into question. We will then be prepared for suggestions of the questions which a rethought view of Jewish modernity might usefully ask and seek to answer. The historical studies which I will mention focus, logically enough, on four principal elements of modernity: self, nation, state and gender.

For self, I turn to the major historical section in Charles Taylor's philosophical attempt to understand the Sources of the Self so as to undergird a self immune to attacks such as Lyotard's. Taylor discerns three sources of the modern self: Enlightenment, Romanticism and Theism. Far from considering modernity as synonymous with secularization, Taylor (in keeping with Weber's founding vision) links the modern self indissolubly to the religious ground out of which it came and in which, for many individuals in the West, it still resides.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it is not immediately obvious how any student of modernization can at once hold up the United States as the quintessential modern society and determine that secularization is prevalent, let alone irreversible here of all places, where ninety percent of the American people continue to tell Gallup's pollsters that they believe in a personal God who will judge them after death and to whom they pray regularly; here where attendance at church and synagogue has remained relatively constant over the past half-century; where religious organizations continue to influence the public agenda and may soon result in nationwide restriction of abortions, public



funding for parochial schools and limits on government support for the arts. Belief and church attendance are less pronounced in Europe, but religious adherence and organizations are hardly peripheral. Taylor, driven by personal commitments analogous to mine, shifts the balance, moves the lens, taking religious actors from the periphery to the center and urging us to see faith not as a residual activity, maintained at the sacrifice of full modernity, but as part and parcel of modernity. For most of the American selves now alive this characterization is certainly accurate, if the polls are accurate. Need I add that it is no less accurate for most of the Jews who have lived in the past two centuries.

Taylor's focus upon romanticism, moreover, means that his conception of self does not "privilege" reason but rather a vaguer faculty called spirit. Many modern Jews have been suspicious of romanticism, with good reason. It was allied to political, cultural and religious forces hostile to Jewish interests and to Judaism. Recall Leo Baeck's denunciation of "romantic religion"<sup>40</sup> or Soloveitchik's insistence upon the rationality of "halakhic man."<sup>41</sup> Yet romanticism is both a powerful undercurrent in Jewish scholarship and a powerful attraction for rational minds—the case of Scholem comes to mind at once.<sup>42</sup> It is also an essential component of modern nationalism, including of course Jewish nationalism. Recall Yehezkel Kaufmann's profound and largely unread meditation on that subject, *Golah Ve-Nekhar*.<sup>43</sup> Taylor forces us to examine the degree to which our commitments, Jewish and modern, scholarly and existential, rest on Romantic ideals of self and society, pursued by faculties other than reason, practical or pure.

Taylor's analysis is supported by E. J. Hobsbawm's recent deconstruction of the idea of the modern nation-state in a survey titled *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*. It is no wonder that Vital's French revolutionary anti-Semite should have attacked the Jews of Strasbourg for retaining a distinctive language, "of which they are ignorant," considering that he was busy effecting his revolution at a time when, according to Hobsbawm, "50% of Frenchmen did not

speak [French] at all, only 12-13% spoke it 'correctly' and many could barely communicate with speakers of other dialects and certainly did not identify themselves as Frenchmen." At the time of Italian unification, Hobsbawm tells us, "only 2 and 1/2% of the population used the language for everyday purposes." This tiny group was "in a real sense a and therefore potentially the Italian people;" or, as he puts it elsewhere, "except for the rulers and the literate, language could hardly be a criterion of nationhood."<sup>44</sup> In this and every other way, nationalism was constructed by nations after the fact and imposed upon populations via compulsory education. What occurred so overtly in the colonies that no historian could miss it, occurred at home in a way disguised in and by the stories that modern historians sympathetic to national aspirations have told. And what is true for language is no less true of national custom or consciousness. "Very few modern national movements are actually based on a strong ethnic consciousness, though they often invent one once they have got going."<sup>45</sup> Kaufmann's difficulties in locating a solid basis for Jewish nationhood were far from unique to political Zionists. In sum, Hobsbawm concludes, "'nation' and 'nationalism' are no longer adequate terms to describe, let alone to analyze, the political entities described as such, or even the sentiments once described by these words."<sup>46</sup> Even if we allow for Hobsbawm's own bias as a reluctant Briton bent on full participation in the new European community, there is much in his book to give the student of Jewish modernity pause. Are we wrong in suspecting that many Jews, even in 1789 and 1848, were not so naive as to trade traditional loyalties wholesale for an idea of enormous power but dubious legitimacy, that their negotiation among proffered loyalties, like that of Gentiles, was far more complex than a simple switch or refusal to switch?

My third example is Roger Chartier's recent attempt to reexamine The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution. In the wake of all I have said thus far, it should come as no surprise that Chartier questions the notion put forward by the revolutionaries themselves, and supported by generations of historians, that in revolting against their king they were merely acting upon the logic of Enlightenment. Chartier prefers to see things the other way around: the revolutionaries,

acting with the usual combination of motives acknowledged and unacknowledged, seized upon the Enlightenment after the fact as justification and explanation for their actions. But Chartier's larger agenda is no less relevant to us as we rethink Jewish modernity; and no less congruent with the direction I discern in Berger. "To move from the 'intellectual' to the 'cultural' is thus, to my mind, not only to enlarge an inquiry or to change its object. Fundamentally, this movement implies casting doubt on two ideas: first, that practices can be deduced from the discourses that authorize or justify them; second, that it is possible to translate into the terms of an explicit ideology the latent meaning of social mechanisms."<sup>47</sup> In our terms: Jews did not first adopt Enlightenment, and therefore cast off traditional belief and practice. Indeed the dichotomized ideologies of Enlightenment and Tradition cannot adequately describe them.

Moreover, that dichotomy cannot bear scrutiny for another reason: "Tradition" was not as uniformly sacred as once believed by historians, nor "modernity" as uniformly secular. Chartier, effortlessly picking apart a stereotypical view of the French Catholic faithful before Revolution, shows that "in fact, with certain differences from one diocese to another, the clergy of the Catholic Reformation managed to impose [only] two things on the faithful: regular and disciplined attendance at Mass and scrupulous performance of their Easter duties."<sup>48</sup> The Revolution was able to behead the king only because he had been desacralized over a long period, because struggles between Jesuits and Jansenists had weakened the credibility of the clergy and their creed, and because the monarchy had to a degree not been desacralized and so drew to itself growing hostility towards and disbelief in the Church, and vice versa.<sup>49</sup> I have no interest in denying that Moses Mendelssohn and Solomon Maimon are novi in the long history of the Jews, that modernity is different from previous periods and decisively so. But I would insist that "desacralization" among Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was far more complex than among Frenchmen, that Jews of previous periods were hardly devoid of either rationality or (in terms suitable to the day) universalism; that far more (and far less) than putatively simple belief in revelation of the Torah at Sinai guaranteed their allegiance to halakha.

To all such portraits of modernity one can now reply, further armed by Chartier: too fast. Jewish history at century's end finds itself, in short, where the Jews do: aware of artifice, alert to doubt, rejoicing in the work to be done, now that so little is self-evident, concerned that it cannot be done well, now that so little is self-evident.

My fourth and final example of recent revisionism concerning modernity is closer to home: Marion Kaplan's ground-breaking argument, in *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, that we have not understood the meaning of modernity for Jews if we only look at half of them, neglecting women. In one sense Kaplan's work confirms Berger's guess that decline in religious belief and practice correlated with proximity to the modern economy, state or science. Women, excluded for most of the nineteenth century from the public realm, were somewhat shielded from the forces which worked upon their husbands, and apparently retained greater allegiance to traditional practice as a result.<sup>50</sup> In another sense, however, Kaplan's work forces us to challenge the cognitive bias which informs even Berger's model.

She asks us to look not at what Jewish women allegedly believed but at what they actually did, not at faith but at ritual, activity which not coincidentally took place in the two spaces reserved to Jewish "control" in the modern period—home and synagogue, primarily the former. Kaplan finds women consistently more observant than their husbands, perhaps because their Jewishness focused so much on symbolic modes of attachment centered on holidays, family and food—tangible goods, material and spiritual, rather than an abstract "truth" in need of scientific "proof" and public certification. The implications of this finding for our understanding and study of Jewish modernity, I believe, are enormous, and I now turn to them, albeit briefly.

#### IV. Jewish Modernity Reconsidered

My attention in the previous two sections of this paper has fallen, with only several exceptions, on works of "general" rather than Jewish scholarship, for the simple reason that

much of the latter still operates in a vacuum untouched by the currents all around it. An airing seemed in order. I intend no inventory of recent Jewish scholarship concerning the modern period, with points awarded or subtracted depending on attention to the "post-moderns" that I have surveyed, and certainly no advertisement for my own work as most worthy of such points. It is not. I have tried, rather, to play: to prod us all into a new look at matters we sometimes think are so obvious that we can bypass them. Neither modernity nor secularization, I believe, can any longer be placed in that category. In conclusion, since I cannot describe what has not yet been studied or develop theories based on data yet to be gathered, I would like to highlight three directions of research that to me seem particularly crucial.

First: let us pay far more attention to ritual, meaning that our theoretical models will come not from sociology, or even from sociologically-minded historians such as Katz, but from anthropology. Goffman and Douglas, Tambiah and Turner have much to teach us. Much of any religious truth is performative: the truths declared when we see ourselves acting in a certain way, from which (in the perennial effort to make sense) we deduce principles congruent with our actions. One puts matza on the seder table so as to ask, with the ancestors: "this matza which we eat—what is its meaning?" I am not urging a simplistic reversal of emphasis from belief to action, as if we do not often act on the basis of belief, but I am urging care to link the two in a thoroughgoing way to which often pay lip service but rarely accomplish. One cannot write the history of modern Jewish faith by reading prayerbooks, for example, unless we know what various Jews made of those prayerbooks, and this we by and large do not know. This caveat is related to, but not the same as, the importance of studying both genders and all strata of Jewish society. Judaism in the modern period should not be viewed as a set of beliefs concerning revelation, chosenness and God but as a set of actions and beliefs, such actions in the nature of the modern case being defined primarily as ritual but including communal, political and professional activities.

Second, let us not undervalue these actions—dismissing them as merely private, or only symbolic, or exclusively aesthetic. There is no rule which says that the quantum of meaning supporting a human life must be found in fixed percentages in the public as opposed to the private sphere, in cognitive rather than affective modes, in political rather than aesthetic activities. What Jews eat, who their friends are, what they work at, who they marry—standard anthropological questions—are no less important to understanding their Judaism (I emphasize: not only their Jewishness, but their Judaism) than the concepts of God and history with which they wrestle. The latter will I hope retain their importance. They are after all my expertise. But I must take my Jewish subjects as wholes, body and soul together. I do not want for a moment to abandon the sociological attempt to explain their beliefs and behavior as best we can. However, taking a cue from Buber or Soloveitchik, I ask if we can understand relation to a divine self unless we understand relation to other human beings, and I note with many currents of contemporary scholarship how varied and complex are the modern notions of sex, love, friendship, gender, body and fulfillment which form an intrinsic part of the psyche, self, community and soul always central to the study of religion.

Finally, let us recognize that the ideological divergence between Israel and diaspora which was my starting point is a welcome and lasting feature of our scholarship, one more way in which the overlap between who we are and what we study cannot be avoided and should not be overlooked. "The course of Jewish history has changed," Vital writes. "That can hardly be doubted. Are the Jews then, for their part, to be so dull, so resistant mentally and intellectually to what is around them, as to fail to revise the questions they ask .... In sum, can good history, in this case as in so many others—'true' history, as Croce put it—fail to be revisionist?"<sup>51</sup> Precisely. Meyer makes effective use in his study of a call by the Israeli novelist and essayist A. B. Yehoshua for an end to non-synonymous usage in Israel of the terms "Israeli" and "Jew." "If you are also a Jew, apart from your Israeliness, then anytime—when you feel like it or when you're in trouble—you can join the Jewish life of the Diaspora."<sup>52</sup> Precisely: language bears

witness to a profound existential and sociological alternative for contemporary Jews, and therefore to a divide which will continue to result in divergent accounts of what is essential and peripheral in Jewish modernity. I would not have it any other way. I am even naive enough—pre- or post-modern, depending on your predilection—to believe that this divergence operates for "the sake of heaven" and that it furthers the pursuit of truth.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Katz, presiding presence of the discipline of modern Jewish history and leading exception to most of the generalizations about the field put forward here, closed his now-classic work, Out of the Ghetto (New York: Schocken Books, 1978, p. 219) with the following summary. "The anticipation of an abruptly dissolving Jewish community in the wake of emancipation was no more than a dream; the wishful thinking of Jewish community in the wake of emancipation was no more than a dream; the wishful thinking of Jewish as well as gentile ideologues. It was inherent in the nature of Jewish existence that emancipation become a turning point in Jewish history, but by no means its termination." All of what I have to say in this paper is in the spirit of that conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 3, xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Jurgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (tr. Frederick Lawrence; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Meyer, Jewish Identity in the Modern World (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), Table of Contents and p. 8. See also the summary statement of modernity on p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-10. Quotations on pp. 8, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., ch. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ch. 3 and conclusion. Quotations on p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> David Vital, The Future of the Jews: A People at the Crossroads? (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) chs. 1-4. Quotation on p. 9.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 115, 103.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Emile Durkheim, Suicide (tr. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson; New York: Free Press, 1066). See especially Book 2, chs. 2 and 5., and Book 3, ch. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (tr. Joseph Ward Swain; New York: Free Press, 1965) 475.

<sup>14</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (ed. and tr. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills; New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) 142-44, 147-51.

<sup>15</sup> See Arnold Eisen, "The Meanings and Confusions of Weberian Rationality" British Journal of Sociology, XIX:1 (March 1978) 57-70.

<sup>16</sup> Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (tr. Talcott Parsons; New York: Scribner's, 1958) 181-82.

<sup>17</sup> Shmuel Eisenstadt, "Post-Traditional Societies and the Continuity and Reconstruction of Tradition," Daedalus 102:1 (Winter 1973) 1-25. See also S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., Patterns of Modernity, Vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 1987) 1-11.

<sup>18</sup> Habermas, Discourse, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), especially ch. 5, and The Heretical Imperative (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), especially chs. 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the definition in Sacred Canopy, 107.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Heretical Imperative, ch. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Weber, Protestant Ethic, 175-83.

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Heschel, Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966).

<sup>24</sup> Martin Buber, I and Thou (tr. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Scribner's, 1970).



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- <sup>25</sup> See, most conveniently, Franz Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking" and "On Being a Jewish Person" Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought (ed. and tr. Nahum Glatzer; New York: Schocken Books, 1976) 190-208, 214-27.
- <sup>26</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith" Tradition (Summer 1965) 5-67.
- <sup>27</sup> Berger, Heretical Imperative, ch. 5.
- <sup>28</sup> This is certainly the tenor of Out of the Ghetto and of the concept of the "neutral society" introduced in Tradition and Crisis (New York: Schocken Books, 1971) ch. 23. Katz's title betokens a static homogeneous tradition shattered by a uniform crisis—far from the actual and complex story his works tell.
- <sup>29</sup> Yosef Yerushalmi, Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) 9.
- <sup>30</sup> David Ellenson, Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990).
- <sup>31</sup> Yerushalmi. Freud's Moses, 97-98.
- <sup>32</sup> Weber, Protestant Ethic, 78.
- <sup>33</sup> Habermas, Discourse, 364-65. See also 304, 314.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.
- <sup>36</sup> Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 3-17, 31-37.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64 (on "terror" and society), 15 (on the self).
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>39</sup> Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chs 1, 24-25, especially pp. 502-13.
- <sup>40</sup> Leo Baeck, "Romantic Religion" Judaism and Christianity (ed. and tr. Walter Kaufmann; Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961) 189-292.

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<sup>41</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man (tr. Lawrence Kaplan; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983).

<sup>42</sup> On this matter see David Biale, Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) and Robert Alter, Necessary Angels (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> Yehezkel Kaufmann, Golah Ve-Nekhar (2 vols.; Tel Aviv: D'vir, 1962) [Hebrew]. See also my treatment of Kaufmann in Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 99-105.

<sup>44</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism Since 1980 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 56, 60-61.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>47</sup> Roger Chartier, The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution (tr. Lydia C. Cochrane; Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), ch. 1. Quotation on p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-96.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, The Making of the Jewish Middle Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), especially pp. 69-84.

<sup>51</sup> Vital, Future, 83-84.

<sup>52</sup> Meyer, Jewish Identity, 76.

<sup>53</sup> This study is indebted to the students in my seminar on "Modernization and Secularization" offered during the 1992 winter semester at Stanford, without whose insights I would not have arrived at the formulations expressed here.